



Where the future is present.

LONNIE BURT, MS, RD, CD-N  
FOOD & CHILD NUTRITION DIRECTOR

BETH SCHIAVINO-NARVAEZ, ED.D  
SUPERINTENDENT

## Testimony before the Appropriations Committee on the Department of Education Budgets

Lonnie Burt  
February 16, 2016

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lonnie Burt and I am a Registered Dietitian, the Senior Director of Food & Child Nutrition Services for Hartford Public Schools and President of the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut (SNACT).

I am here today to testify that while we understand the challenges with the State's current fiscal budget, eliminating State Department of Education programs including School Breakfast and Healthy Food Certification is not the way forward, especially when every bit of evidence shows that not only are the meals served at school often more nutritious than meals served at home – but that children who have better nutrition perform better in school, as well. For years, Connecticut and our school nutrition programs have been leaders on the national front, providing meals and snacks that exceed federal nutrition standards. This funding is extremely important to all districts participating because it goes beyond snacks and fundraising activities and impacts the overall school wellness environment within each district.

Presently in Hartford approximately 58% of enrolled students live in households that receive SNAP benefits formerly known as food stamps. To give you a perspective, a family of four can have a gross income of no greater than \$607 per week to qualify for SNAP benefits. Clearly these guidelines make it challenging for any household to maintain a food budget that includes a variety of nutrient dense foods such as whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and lean proteins needed for health promotion and disease prevention. School meals in Hartford are a partner with these families to expand access to foods that promote health.

The State funding we receive annually in Hartford for Healthy Food Certification is approximately \$325,000 and for breakfast \$155,000 which represents 8% of our total food budget, and 45% of our total fresh produce budget. The loss of this funding will have a direct impact on the quantity and variety of fresh produce we will be able to offer to the 20,000 students who eat lunch with us daily. It has been my experience that students choose and consume more fruits and vegetables when fresh produce is offered. If less fresh produce is offered, there will be an overall negative impact on the health and well-being of our students today and in the future. Part of my responsibility is to help the students we are feeding today

*"The Hartford Public Schools is the State Capital's Portfolio District of Excellence"*



Where the future is present.

to become life-long healthy eaters. This funding is imperative to that mission. This funding also helps support the Summer Feeding Program, Grab and Go Breakfast Carts, and At-Risk Supper Programs all of which could be affected by the loss of funding.

As with most School Food Service Programs, our program needs to be self-sufficient and not rely on subsidies from the Board of Education general budget. We need to operate a balanced budget regardless of financial constraints which is always challenging. Historically, one of the ways school districts generate income and balance their budgets is to sell additional snack foods during meal service that are not under the USDA meal pattern guidelines. Presently, in Hartford we are fortunate to be able to limit the sale of snack foods that meet the Connecticut nutrition standards at the secondary schools only. This is due in part to our district's participation in Healthy Food Certification and the additional funding we receive. Eliminating this funding may require selling additional snack food type items district-wide to balance our budget. This could lead to students choosing snack foods instead of lunch. As a Registered Dietitian I find the choices required to balance the budget are always difficult, and having to increase snack food sales is something I do not condone.

In addition, Healthy Food Certification influences the whole school environment particularly fundraising activities that occur on school campuses. Districts participating in Healthy Food Certification must follow the stringent fundraising guidelines which require food items being sold to adhere to the Connecticut Nutrition Standards. I personally have seen a significant decrease in the amount of candy, bake, and other junk-food type sales that were occurring in our schools prior to participating in Healthy Food Certification.

School foodservice directors across Connecticut recognize the challenges faced when it comes to high rates of childhood obesity, hunger and the lack of a balanced diet. We are committed to working hard to assist in the effort to provide our students with affordable, healthy, fresh, and delicious food options. Discontinuing Healthy Food Certification and Breakfast funding is a disservice to the health and well-being of students in Hartford as well as the state and is taking a step backwards. I strongly urge the State Legislature to continue to stand by good nutrition for our students and not support these funding cuts.

*"The Hartford Public Schools is the State Capital's Portfolio District of Excellence"*